

Operation Full Court Press Key to Retaining, Recruiting Quality Soldiers

Story & graphics by **TIMOTHY L. HALE**
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FORT BRAGG, N.C. – As the defense budget continues to shrink, the next few years will prove challenging for the U.S. Army Reserve in terms of maintaining manpower and readiness.

In the past month, Army Reserve leaders have held town halls and spoken with media outlining how a new retention initiative will help the Army Reserve meet Congressionally-mandated end strength goals.

According to Mark Cogburn, chief of the Adjutant General Division, U.S. Army Reserve Command, G1, Operation Full Court Press is a new initiative “intended to focus our leaders on the issues that will have the largest impact on U.S. Army Reserve personnel strength.”

Cogburn said the main tasks of Operation Full Court Press are to increase accessions (recruit), reduce controllable Soldier losses (those currently serving), resolve “flags” or unfavorable actions, increase promotions to sergeant and staff sergeant, and improve the sponsorship program.

Before looking at how Operation Full Court Press will address these tasks, it is important to review where the Army Reserve has come from in regards to overall end strength.

Rising and Falling End Strength

At the end of 2000, there were nearly 207,000 serving in the Army Reserve. Those numbers increased to nearly 212,000 in 2003 to support Operation Iraqi Freedom and the nearly two-year old Operation Enduring Freedom.

In 2005, Army Reserve end strength leveled off at a little more than 189,000, staying there through 2007. As the Army’s operation focus shifted from Iraq to Afghanistan, starting in 2008, the need for Army Reserve Soldiers increased with end strength reaching a high-water mark of a little more than 205,000.

End strength numbers started falling in 2009 –from a little more than 205,000 to the current 195,000.

Ultimately, Congress currently funds the Army Reserve at 205,000 Soldiers.

Brig. Gen. Tammy Smith, U.S. Army Reserve assistant chief of staff, said that maintaining Army Reserve end strength is important for two reasons: Congressionally-mandated troop levels and readiness.

“We have a responsibility, not only to the nation but to the Congress, to ensure that our strength is maintained at a level that is consistent with our funding,” Smith said.

“When you look at the macro level, strength is important because we are funded to be at our strength. Congress gives us money and says, ‘here is enough money for your authorization.’ We use that money for commanders to conduct the type of training and do all the things we need to do to have a ready force for our nation,” she said.

“The other part is that strength is the foundational piece of readiness,” Smith said. “And for us to be able to perform those missions that our nation requires us to perform, we’ve got to have sufficient Soldiers in our ranks to fill all the positions – leader positions and Soldier positions.”

Retention Requires Active Leaders

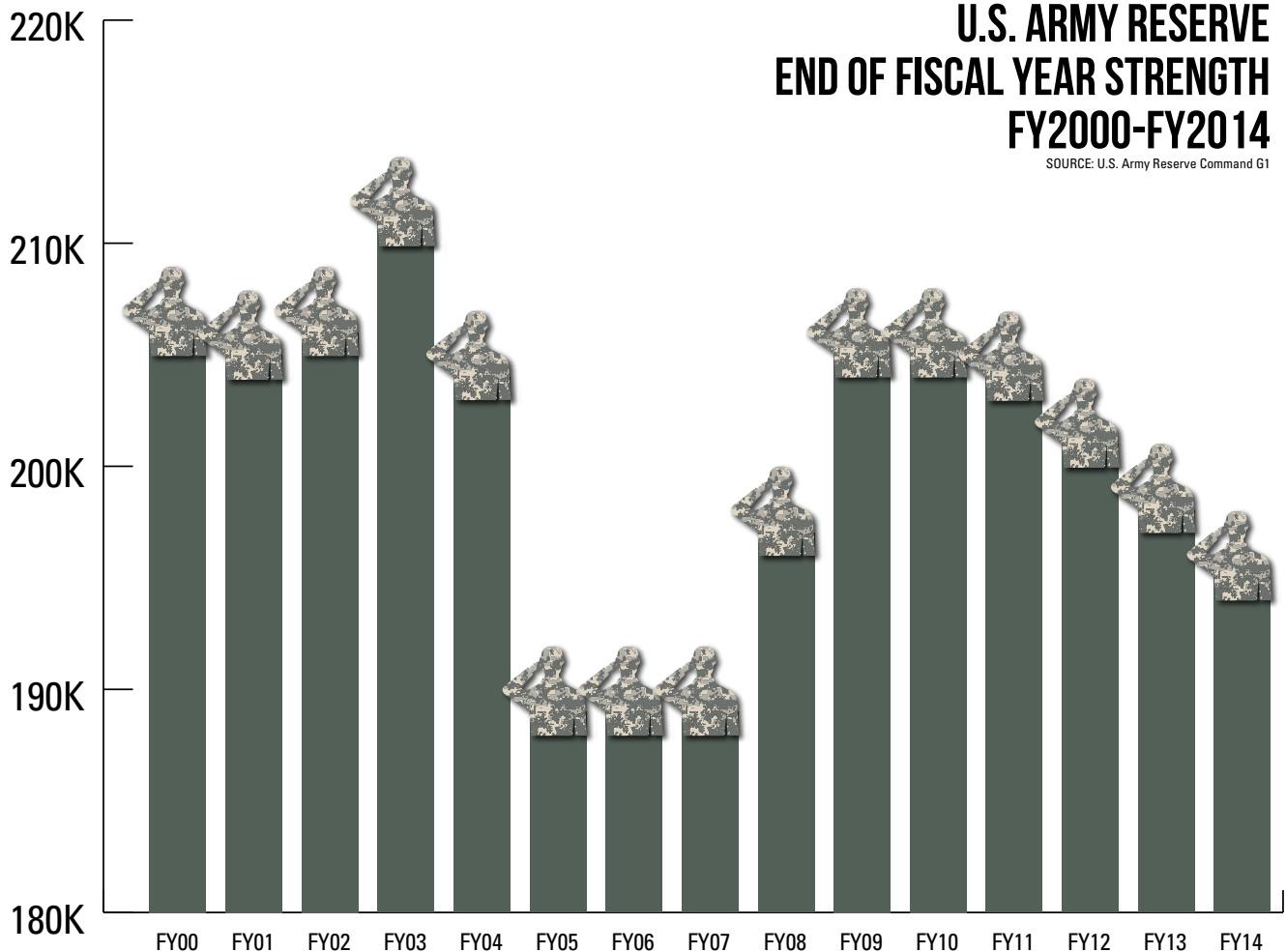
Smith said the responsibility for retention rests with unit leaders – from general officers down to platoon sergeants.

If leaders are not actively engaged with their Soldiers especially during Battle Assemblies, those Soldiers may question why they even joined in the first place, she said.

“You can’t have ready Soldiers if you don’t have them in the formation,” Smith said. “Keeping Soldiers in our ranks is a leader activity. It’s a one-on-one conversation that has to occur at every level – from

U.S. ARMY RESERVE END OF FISCAL YEAR STRENGTH FY2000-FY2014

SOURCE: U.S. Army Reserve Command G1



EBB AND FLOW. Army Reserve end-strength by fiscal year. The Army Reserve end strength peaks represent Soldiers needed for Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom troop surges.

team and squad level all the way up to our command sergeants major and commanding generals.”

It boils down to leaders greeting Soldiers with open arms.

“Every leader in the Army Reserve has a responsibility to retain those Soldiers, to bring them in, and keep them in the Family,” Cogburn said.

Leaders need to know their Soldiers as people, not just a position on a manning roster, Smith said.

“Having an understanding of who they are, why they are in the Army Reserve, and what keeps them coming back,” she said. “You have to have a good human understanding of who your Soldiers are. Relevant and well-planned training also keeps them coming back. They want to have a reason to come to Battle Assembly.”

Maj. Gen. Luis Visot, U.S. Army Reserve chief of staff, said leaders must understand their Soldiers in order to retain them.

“The whole retention piece is getting to know and understand your Soldiers, really interacting with that Soldier, really appreciating and valuing the individual, and understanding what is going on with their Family and their employers,” Visot said. “If you show and demonstrate that, there is no doubt in my mind you will retain that particular Soldier.”

Controlling Soldier Losses

Ultimately, Cogburn said the key to success in Operation Full Court Press is managing controllable losses.

“This is a major focus we will be undertaking with the leadership,” Cogburn said.

In the years immediately following 9/11, Cogburn said recruiting and retaining Soldiers was much

See **RETENTION**, Pg. 16

RETENTION

from Pg. 15

easier because there was more money and incentives available, leading to a higher number of Soldiers on unit rosters.

Now, the situation is not the same. He said the recruiting pool is smaller than in previous years with three or four out of 10 people eligible for military service. He said those three or four individuals have many paths to choose from ranging from colleges and universities, technical schools, and even other military branches.

“We are in a resource-constrained environment where we can’t offer incentives to everybody,” he said. “The reason we were so successful the last time

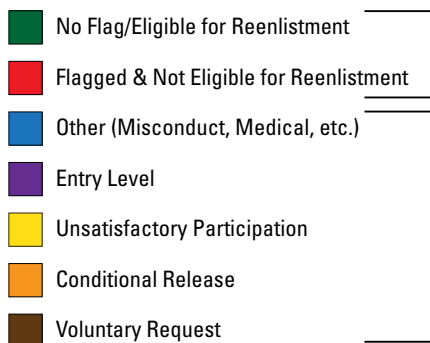
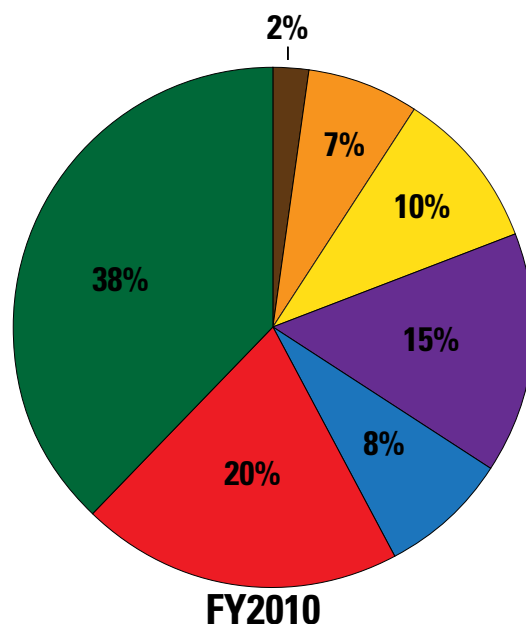
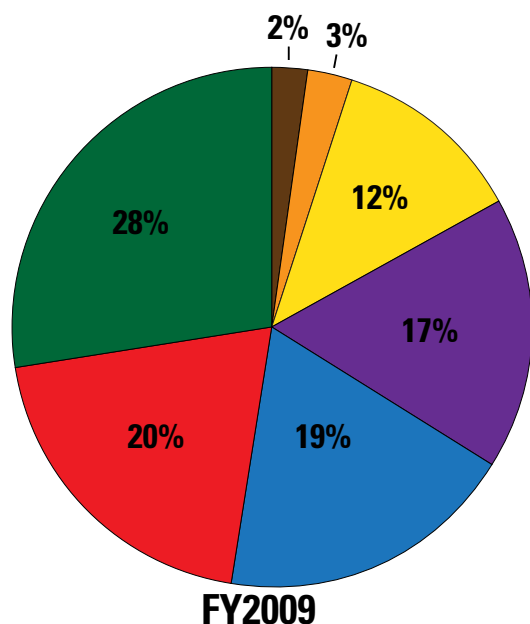
we increased our strength was because we had more money.”

There was also the lure of being in an operational military environment, one the U.S. had not seen on a large scale since Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. As the military operations wind down, senior defense leaders are looking at a downsized, garrison-style military.

“We’ve been through this before. We are on the downside of a cyclic process,” Cogburn said.

“The key to our success is keeping the people that we have,” he said. “We have to reduce the numbers of Soldiers who voluntarily leave the force.”

Non-Prior Service Enlisted Troop Program Unit (TPU) Accession Cohort



Cohort Retained

Cohort Losses

NOTES:

The FY2009 Non-Prior Service TPU numbers reflect re-enlistment eligibility within the first 60 months of service.

The FY2010 Non-Prior Service TPU numbers reflect re-enlistment eligibility within the first 48 months of service.

Percentages rounded up to the next whole number.

SOURCE: U.S. Army Reserve Command G1

ELIGIBLE SOLDIERS. A comparison of non-prior service enlisted Troop Program Unit, or TPU, Soldiers within their first-term re-enlistment eligibility windows who enlisted in Fiscal Years 2009 and 2010.

Visot said a key to controlling losses is building a trust between the leader and the Soldier.

"If they trust us as leaders, they will commit themselves and give you more than you ever ask of them," he said.

These controllable losses include: Soldiers who end their contract through ETS (end term of service), unsatisfactory participants (Soldiers who no longer come to drill), entry-level separations (Soldiers who join, drill, but then never ship to basic training), voluntary requests (when a Soldier has a medical or Family hardship), and conditional release (a Soldier who requests to go to the Individual Ready Reserve, National Guard, or active Army).

Of the Fiscal Year 2009 non-prior service enlisted Troop Program Unit accessions, 43 percent of those Soldiers were lost to one of these five categories. Of the Fiscal Year 2010 enlistees, 52 percent were lost.

U.S. Army Reserve G1 officials say that approximately two-thirds of all Army Reserve losses fall into one of the five categories.

"Every situation is unique," said Col. Cynthia McCarty, director, USARC G1. "We have to find out what is causing a person to decide, that at this point in time, they want out; they can't do this any longer."

McCarty said many times, Soldiers have job, Family, or educational demands that hamper their participation. She said unit leaders need to figure out how they can accommodate those demands on the individual within the existing policies.

Clearing "flags"

Of the remaining Soldiers who do not fall under a controllable loss are those who are "flagged" and are not eligible for re-enlistment.

Soldiers can be flagged for various reasons but the usual causes are failing height and weight or the Army Physical Fitness Test.

At a recent town hall in Kaiserslautern, Germany, Command Sgt. Maj. Luther Thomas Jr., the Army Reserve's top enlisted Soldier, addressed the flagging issue.

"I know it's difficult with Soldiers coming one weekend a month, two weeks at a time throughout the year, but as a leader, you have to figure out ... how do I motivate this Soldier? How do I inspire this Soldier to be all that they can be?" Thomas said.

McCarty said Army Reserve leaders need to focus on Soldiers who are flagged and resolve those flags.

"Either get the Soldier to pass the PT test or off the height and weight," McCarty said. "Then, the Soldier can reenlist or be separated (if they don't meet the standard)."

A flagged Soldier jeopardizes their career in many ways – one of which is career advancement.

"Flags prevent promotions," she added. "So we want to take care of our Soldiers, we want them to benefit from their military experience, and realize their potential."

Visot said there are plenty of leaders to prevent a Soldier from being flagged. He tells Soldiers the Army issues them seven people to lead and guide them - a sponsor, a battle buddy, a squad leader, a platoon sergeant, a platoon leader, a first sergeant, and a company commander.

"That's seven people to make sure they are role models and upholding standards," Visot said. He said that once Soldiers see their leaders upholding the standards, then the Soldiers will more than likely follow suit.

"Help the Soldiers resolve the flags, so they can continue their good service," Cogburn said.

The Way Ahead

Ultimately, Cogburn said the current situation didn't happen overnight and it will not be fixed overnight.

However, through a concerted effort by all leaders at all levels, it can be changed.

"We must set the conditions to inform and educate every Soldier at every level within the Army Reserve of their individual responsibility in regards to maintaining their readiness, their resiliency, and their professional career," Cogburn said.

"Managing their individual responsibilities as Soldiers and leaders has a direct influence on the overall manpower and readiness of the Army Reserve," he said. 🇺🇸

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a series of articles regarding Operation Full Court Press and the manning and readiness of the Army Reserve. Future articles will discuss leadership, readiness, career progression, counseling, and unit retention success stories.